THE MANIFESTO OF INVERTED POWER

Power as duty, prosperity as right,
leadership as sacrifice

Civic Ascetic Meritocracy

Civiek Ascetisch Meritocratisme

A political-philosophical manifesto
on power, reward, responsibility and dignity

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Preamble

Every civilisation that takes itself seriously is eventually confronted with the same fundamental question: what may the person who holds power over others possess for themselves? What may they enjoy? What may they pass on to their children? And above all: why?

History has almost always given the same answer. Power was rewarded with wealth. Wealth was converted into more power. Status was inherited. Privileges were normalised into self-evident entitlements. The circle closed. Whether it was the feudal lord who owned both land and the people on it, the capitalist owner of the means of production who determined the living conditions of thousands of workers, the party official with access to special shops and better housing, or the modern politician with networks of interests, advisory positions and future board seats — again and again a class arose that began to treat the instruments of society as its personal property.

We reject this logic at its root. Not out of naïve idealism, but out of institutional analysis. When power and material reward systematically coincide, a systematic corruption of motives arises. Not because all leaders are bad, but because the system rewards the wrong people and exposes good people to temptations that are unnecessarily large and made legitimate.

We propose a different law, so simple that it is radical:

> **The greater the power a person receives over society, the smaller the personal material benefit that may flow from that power.**

Power is not a reward. Power is not property. Power is not a career prize. Power is a temporary social responsibility that one borrows, not owns. The official who manages billions in public resources, who takes decisions affecting millions of citizens, or who may issue orders to thousands of people, stands under a stricter moral and institutional law than the citizen without such power.

This principle is not moral asceticism born of a sense of superiority. It is not a call to poverty or self-mortification. It is an institutional necessity. A society that rewards its highest responsibilities with the greatest material privileges systematically creates the wrong incentives. It attracts people who seek power because power pays. It exposes good people to structural conflicts of interest. It turns leadership into a business model instead of a service.

We start from a realistic view of human nature. People are not angels. They can be ambitious, selfish, idealistic, greedy, loyal, vain, altruistic, envious, courageous and power-seeking — often in the same person at different moments. A good state is not built for saints. It is built so that even fallible people find it difficult to become tyrants, plunderers or dynastic rulers. Good institutions must not depend on perfect people. They must be designed so that the costs of abuse are high, detection is likely, and the reward of pure service is the only structural reward that remains.

This manifesto designs that state. It describes a society that is economically strongly egalitarian without reducing human dignity to uniform poverty. That is meritocratic without creating a new caste. That is democratic without despising competence. That is

strict against abuse without smothering freedom. That honours mastery above rank. That treats leadership as sacrifice, not as a prize.

We call this political and economic philosophy Civic Ascetic Meritocracy. It is not a utopia. It is an institutional design. It does not promise that corruption, egoism or struggles for power will disappear. It promises that the structures within which these human tendencies operate will be arranged so that they can cause as little damage as possible and are rewarded as little as possible in a systematic way.

What follows is not a list of policy proposals. It is the elaboration of a complete philosophy: with a view of human nature, a theory of power, an economic order, an institutional architecture, a culture of dignity, and a realistic path of transition. Every major claim is explained logically. Every principle is supplied with examples, objections and answers. The work is written as if a new political order is genuinely being proposed — because that is precisely what it is.

1. The Crisis of Power and Reward

In almost all existing political and economic systems a nearly natural, rarely questioned rule applies: the more responsibility one carries, the more resources, status, privacy and opportunities for private enrichment one receives. The minister earns more than the nurse. The general lives more comfortably than the soldier. The director of a strategic energy company or a large hospital can take home more than those who maintain the turbines or care for the patients. The political elite enjoys networks, invitations, advisory contracts, future board seats and informal privileges that the ordinary citizen will never see.

This arrangement seems logical. It seems to reward weight, stress and decision pressure. It is not — or at least it is far more and far more dangerous than that. It creates an incentive structure in which those who seek power do so because power pays. It turns leadership into an investment with returns. It systematically attracts people who are primarily interested in the advantages of the position, not in its duties. And it slowly corrupts those who initially entered with good intentions, because the temptation is structural, legitimate and culturally normalised.

When power and material reward coincide, a systematic corruption of motives arises. Not because all leaders are bad, but because the system rewards the wrong people and exposes good people to incentives that cloud their judgment. A minister who knows that his future standard of living depends heavily on the networks he builds now thinks differently about legislation that might restrict those networks. A general who can become personally rich from defence contracts or later directorships thinks differently about procurement decisions. A hospital director who earns many times more than the intensive-care nurse lives in a different moral, social and material world from the people whose labour he coordinates. The distance becomes not only economic, but also epistemic and moral.

The crisis is not only moral. It is structural. A society that rewards its highest responsibilities with the greatest privileges sows the seeds of its own elite formation. It creates a class that has an interest in keeping the distance between leaders and the led large. It normalises the idea that those who have more to say may also have more. It makes status an almost natural consequence of hierarchy rather than something that must be earned through actual contribution.

Consider concrete examples. In many countries a senior civil servant or politician receives a salary which, together with expense allowances, pension rights, representation budgets and later private opportunities, enables a standard of living far removed from that of the average citizen he or she is supposed to serve. At the same time nurses, teachers, police officers, bus drivers and technicians struggle with workload, relatively low pay and little social status, despite the fact that their work makes the daily continuity of society possible. The system says, through its reward structure: your work is worth less because you do not give orders.

This is not only unfair. It is functionally dangerous. It draws talent away from executive professions into management and administrative functions, not because those functions better match someone’s talent, but because they are better rewarded. It creates a culture in which “climbing higher” is the only recognisable model of success. It discourages

mastery in executive roles. And it turns every promotion into a potential conflict of interest, because material reward grows with power.

We reject this normalisation. We break the chain. Not by punishing leaders, but by systematically disconnecting power from personal material reward. That is the core of the crisis analysis: the crisis is not that power exists, but that power is treated as a prize one is allowed to collect.

2. Dignity Without Rank

A society does not function thanks to its leaders. It functions thanks to millions of people who build, care, repair, produce, transport, clean, protect, teach, maintain, program, harvest, operate and carry. Leadership exists only because there are people to lead. Without the nurse the hospital director is superfluous. Without the soldier the general is a man with a uniform and a staff map. Without the technician the factory director is a manager of idle machines. Without the teacher the education minister is an administrator of empty buildings. Without the farmer the minister of agriculture is an official without food.

This simple truth is systematically denied by the status hierarchies of most societies. Cultural, symbolic and material recognition rises with rank. Those who have more people "under them" are treated as if they were intrinsically more valuable. This is a deep confusion of function and worth.

Therefore social dignity must never depend on hierarchical position. The worth of a human being is not determined by the number of subordinates he or she has, nor by the size of the budget he manages, nor by the media attention the function generates. It is determined by the quality of the contribution, the reliability of the work, the mastery of a craft, the degree to which that work makes the community possible, and the ethical attitude with which it is performed.

We reject the tacit assumption that the administrator is more important than the executor. We reject the cultural hierarchy that confuses rank with value. An outstanding carpenter, an exceptional nurse, a brilliant technician, a skilled farmer, a dedicated teacher or a gifted programmer must be able to lead a fully successful, comfortable and dignified life without ever seeking a managerial position. Mastery is more important than rank.

This has concrete cultural and institutional consequences. It means that career paths in executive and specialist professions must be equally serious, equally well rewarded (or better) and equally respected as management paths. It means that a hospital must treat a nurse with twenty years of experience and exceptional clinical skill at least as well, materially and in status, as a relatively young manager. It means that the army must not force an excellent non-commissioned officer or specialist to become an officer in order to advance in recognition and reward. It means that education, media and public culture must celebrate mastery, not only "leadership".

When a society takes this principle seriously, the psychological pressure on individuals changes. People no longer have to choose between "staying with what I am good at" and "climbing higher in order to be respected". They can pursue excellence in their craft without it being seen as a dead end. That is not only more humane. It is also more efficient: it keeps talent where it is most productive instead of systematically sucking it into management positions.

Dignity without rank is not sentiment. It is a structural revaluation of what actually keeps a society running.

3. The Inverted Ladder

We introduce the Inverse Reward Ladder as a central institutional principle.

In traditional systems the following chain applies: more responsibility → more power → more money → more status → more privileges. This chain seems almost a law of nature. It is the result of centuries of custom, of market logic, of political power rewarding itself, and of the human tendency to link hierarchy with material superiority. In Civic Ascetic Meritocracy this chain is deliberately and systematically broken.

Concretely: an ordinary worker, technician, nurse, teacher or soldier can have more freely disposable personal income than a minister, general, national administrator or senior civil servant. Not because leaders are punished. Not out of resentment against those who carry responsibility. But because leadership must not function as a personal business model. Because the material reward of power corrupts motives. Because society has an interest in those who hold the highest posts doing so despite the material costs, not because of the material benefits.

Executive and specialist work may — and must — be rewarded materially comfortably. It is productive, often heavy, physically or mentally demanding, and directly necessary for the functioning of society. A nurse who works night shifts, a technician who works in the cold, a teacher who educates thirty children at once, a soldier who stands ready: their work deserves a reward that makes a dignified, comfortable life possible, including room for family, rest, culture and personal development.

Leaders, by contrast, accept a different package: greater responsibility, stricter control, less privacy, limited opportunities for private enrichment, and a relatively sober private life. Leadership thereby becomes a social service, not a career prize. The inverted ladder is not an egalitarianism of poverty. It is an egalitarianism of reward relative to power. It makes high functions something one accepts despite the material costs, not because of the material benefits.

Practical elaboration. Suppose the median income of an experienced nurse or technician in the public sector is significantly higher than the personally disposable income of a minister or director-general. The minister has functional means (housing during the term of office, transport, security, staff), but those means are not his. He cannot sell them, inherit them, or convert them into private wealth. When he leaves office they remain behind. His personal income is sober. His privacy is limited. His finances are public. His secondary income is strictly regulated or prohibited.

This changes the psychological and social meaning of promotion. Promotion to a high function is no longer seen as “finally the reward for all that hard work”. It is seen as accepting a heavier burden, with less personal material freedom. People who are purely financially driven will find the ladder less attractive. People who are prepared to serve despite the costs remain. That is precisely the intention of the filter.

The inverted ladder is not an absolute egalitarian income policy. Room remains for differences based on scarcity, training, experience, danger and irregularity of work. But those differences must not systematically increase with the degree of power over others. The technician with rare skills may earn well. The minister may not become significantly richer from his office.

4. Leadership as Sacrifice

Power is borrowed.
Wealth confers no right to rule.
Leadership is not a prize. It is an obligation.
Whoever receives more power must be given less opportunity to use that power for himself.

These statements form the core of the doctrine. They are not slogans. They are operational principles that must be institutionally elaborated.

The official who manages billions in public resources, who takes decisions affecting millions of citizens, or who may issue orders to thousands of people, stands under a stricter moral and institutional law than the citizen without such power. The higher the function, the heavier the responsibility, the stricter the control, the more limited the personal material benefit, the less privacy, the greater the publicity of interests.

This is not asceticism from moral superiority. It is asceticism from institutional necessity. A society that allows its leaders to grow rich from their office creates a structural conflict of interest. A society that requires its leaders to accept the office as a sacrifice — in the sense of material limitation and heightened accountability — systematically reduces that conflict.

Leadership as sacrifice does not mean that leaders must live in misery. It means that their personal material situation must not be significantly improved by the office, and that the means placed at their disposal are functional, not privatizable. It means that the psychological reward of leadership must come from the meaning of the task, from the recognition of proven competence, from the trust of society — not from a more luxurious private life than the people they lead.

When leadership is understood as sacrifice, the public culture around leaders also changes. There is no longer any reason for personality cults, for enormous portraits, for buildings named after living leaders, for state propaganda that glorifies the person. The office must be greater than the office-holder. The leader represents an institution and is replaceable. His or her personal charisma may be useful, but must never replace the institutional safeguards.

5. The Voluntary Selection Filter

No one is forced to seek promotion. An outstanding engineer need not become a manager. A good soldier need not become an officer. A brilliant doctor need not become a hospital director. A gifted teacher need not become a school leader or education official. People must be able to live successfully, comfortably and with respect without ever obtaining managerial power.

Thereby the idea disappears that social advancement necessarily means: climbing ever higher in the hierarchy. The cultural pressure to “make a career” by seeking management positions is reduced. The psychological and social reward of excellence in one’s own craft is strengthened.

Because higher functions do not automatically yield higher wealth, people who seek promotion solely for financial gain are largely discouraged. This is the voluntary selection filter. It works not by forbidding people to rise, but by reducing the material attractiveness of rising. Those who climb the ladder purely for money find the top less attractive. Those who are prepared to bear the burdens despite material sobriety remain.

We explicitly and emphatically acknowledge that this is not a perfect moral filter. People can also seek power out of ego, prestige, ideological obsession, control, narcissism, personal influence, or the pure lust to command. Economic sobriety is therefore never the only protection against abuse of power. It is merely a necessary first filter. The real protection must be institutional: transparency, control, rotation, independent oversight, the possibility of dismissal and prosecution, and cultural norms that stigmatise abuse of power.

The voluntary filter has an additional advantage: it reduces competition for management positions by people who do not really fit them. An outstanding surgeon who is forced to become a manager in order to “advance” is often a loss to surgery and a mediocre manager. When that pressure falls away, specialists more often remain specialists. That is good for the quality of the service.

The filter works only if the material reward of executive and specialist roles is genuinely competitive or superior. If the nurse or technician still earns significantly less than the manager, the pressure remains. The inverted ladder and the voluntary filter are therefore inseparably linked.

6. The Limits of Intrinsic Motivation

Good institutions must never depend on the hope that leaders are by nature virtuous. They must be designed so that even people with mixed motives — and that is most people — find it difficult to abuse systematically.

The inverted ladder and the voluntary filter reduce the attractiveness of power for those who are purely financially driven. They do not reduce the attractiveness for those who seek power for power's sake: out of ego, ideological conviction, the lust for control, narcissistic needs, or the belief that they alone know the truth. For that category economic sobriety is insufficient.

Therefore the institutional architecture must go further. Transparency, independent control, rotation of officials, limited terms of office, public hearings, whistle-blower protection, and the possibility of swift and fair prosecution are not signs of distrust of "good" leaders. They are the recognition that no society can rely on the permanence of good motives in those who exercise power.

Intrinsic motivation — the desire to serve, to contribute, to be competent — is valuable and must be cultivated. But it must never be the only or primary safeguard. A system that works only when the right people are in the right places is a fragile system. A system that still works when the wrong people temporarily hold power is robust. That is the difference between moralistic politics and institutional politics.

7. Power as Danger

Power is dangerous. Not because all power corrupts, and not because every powerful person is bad, but because unlimited or poorly controlled power has a structural tendency to protect itself, expand, privatise and isolate itself from criticism.

The dangers are well known and historically repeatedly proven: hidden corruption, favouritism, ideological conformity, bureaucratisation, addiction to power, elite formation, manipulation of selection procedures, information control, nepotism, institutional self-protection, and the gradual shift from “serving society” to “protecting one’s own position and networks”.

A serious ideology does not deny these dangers. It does not idealise human beings. It designs concrete, operational countermeasures for them. Each of these dangers must be answered with specific institutional designs, not with moral admonitions.

Hidden corruption is fought with full financial transparency, regular wealth audits, disclosure of interests, and independent investigative powers. Favouritism is fought with objective selection procedures, anonymous components where possible, and external oversight. Ideological conformity is fought with protection of dissenting opinions, academic freedom, and the refusal to let political loyalty prevail over competence. Bureaucratisation is fought with rotation, term limits, and the obligation of results accountability. Elite formation is fought with the inverted ladder, the prohibition of dynasties, and the cultural revaluation of mastery. And so on.

The core is: power is dangerous enough to be permanently treated with institutional distrust, without that distrust having to turn into personal hostility toward individual office-holders. It is the office that is dangerous, not necessarily the person. Therefore the safeguards must be directed at the office.

8. The Law of Increasing Control

The greater the power, the greater the control.

An ordinary citizen has maximum personal privacy. His or her finances are private, unless there is concrete suspicion of criminal offences. A national administrator has far less financial and institutional privacy. His or her income, assets, interests, secondary activities and family ties that may be relevant to conflicts of interest are public or at least accessible to independent control bodies.

Privileges decrease while accountability increases. This is the political gravity of the system: the higher someone rises, the heavier the institutional responsibility becomes, the stricter the control, the more limited the personal room for manoeuvre.

Concrete measures include, among others: full financial transparency for top officials; independent anti-corruption authorities with their own investigative powers and resources; regular wealth audits by external, rotating controllers; disclosure of interests and relevant family ties; prohibition of hidden financial constructions and offshore arrangements for office-holders; heavy restrictions on or prohibition of paid secondary functions; prohibition of personal enrichment through public decisions; strong, legally anchored protection of whistle-blowers; independent investigative commissions that cannot be dissolved by the political leadership; rotation of controllers so that no long-term friendly ties arise; separation between control bodies and political leadership; clear, swift procedures for dismissal and prosecution in case of abuse; temporary terms of office; and periodic re-evaluation of administrators.

Family members of leaders may receive no automatic economic or institutional advantages. No political dynasties. No hereditary administrative privileges. No unofficial court. No “special schools” or “special clinics” for the children of the powerful. The children of a minister or general enjoy the same public provisions as the children of a technician or nurse. That is not cruelty. That is consistency.

The law of increasing control is not an expression of distrust of individuals. It is the recognition that power is structurally dangerous, and that the greater the power, the greater the need for external, independent, permanent safeguards.

9. Functional Comfort versus Personal Luxury

We make a hard, legally and culturally anchored distinction between personal luxury and functional means.

A general need not be rich. When his function is extremely demanding — long working days, high stress, permanent readiness, travel, security risks — the state may provide him with reliable housing, healthy food, excellent medical supervision, security, transport, a driver, communication means, specialised staff and good sleeping and working conditions. These are not personal privileges. These are functional aids necessary to perform the function adequately and sustainably.

The same applies to a minister, a judge in a high court, a director of a critical infrastructure organisation, or a scientist in a strategic research programme. The means follow the function, not the person.

The hard rule is: the right of use ends as soon as the function ends. The car remains the property of the state. The official residence remains the property of the state. The staff works for the function, not for the person. The administrator cannot sell these means, inherit them, give them away, convert them into private wealth, or take them into a subsequent private career. When he or she leaves office, everything is surrendered. There is no “soft landing” through the retention of functional means.

To prevent functional provisions from slowly turning into hidden luxury, strict rules apply. There is a public register of functional means per function. There are periodic independent audits that check whether the means are still functionally justified. There is a prohibition on upgrades that are not strictly functional (no more luxurious cars “because it befits the status”, no larger residences “because it is representative” without objective justification). There is absolute separation between functional use and private wealth. And there is the cultural norm that whoever privatises or misuses these means is condemned not only legally, but also morally and socially.

The distinction between functional comfort and personal luxury is one of the most important practical safeguards against the gradual formation of a new elite. Without this distinction every system, however egalitarian in intention, slides toward special provisions for the powerful. With this distinction the powerful official remains a temporary steward of means he does not own.

10. Meritocracy Without Caste

Leaders must not simply be chosen because they are rich, popular, well-connected or from the right family. Competence, experience, ethical suitability and proven results must be decisive. That is the meritocratic ideal.

Depending on the function the following are used: education, examinations, practical experience, psychological suitability, proven results in previous functions, leadership experience, ethical assessments, peer review, public hearings, temporary trial periods, and periodic re-certification. For technical functions much can be measured objectively. For political and administrative functions a mixture of objective and deliberative elements remains necessary.

The classic problem of meritocracy nevertheless remains: who determines what merit is? When those already at the top determine the criteria and the selectors, a self-reproducing elite arises. People select people who resemble themselves — in background, in style, in networks, in views. Meritocracy then becomes a legitimation of existing privileges rather than a breakthrough of them.

To prevent this, checks and balances apply. There are multiple independent selection bodies, so that no single body has a monopoly. There is citizen representation on selection committees. There are anonymous examinations and assessments where possible. Criteria are public and contestable. There are appeal procedures. The selection processes themselves are periodically evaluated by external parties. And the inverted ladder ensures that the material attractiveness of the top positions remains limited, so that the pressure to select “the right people” is less fed by the desire to protect one’s own class.

Meritocracy without caste is possible, but only when the institutional safeguards against self-reproduction are taken as seriously as the selection on competence itself.

11. Democracy and Expertise

Expertise is not the same as politics. This distinction is fundamental and is too often ignored, both by technocrats who want to reduce politics to technique, and by populists who dismiss expertise as elite arrogance.

For an engineer, surgeon, pilot, military specialist, epidemiologist or civil engineer, competence can be measured reasonably objectively. There are examinations, practical results, peer reviews, objective margins of error. For political questions that does not apply. Political questions contain norms and values. There is no examination by which one can objectively determine the perfect tax policy, immigration policy, foreign policy, or distribution of care capacity. Those are choices about priorities, about justice, about risks the society is prepared to take, about the future it wants.

Therefore the principle applies: Expertise determines what is feasible. Society determines which direction is desirable.

Democratic legitimacy and meritocratic competence are combined. Technical functions and executive specialisms are filled on the basis of proven ability. Political direction choices remain subject to democratic procedures, with protection of minorities, fundamental rights, and the possibility of peaceful transfer of power. The expert may say: “This measure is technically unfeasible” or “This measure has the following probable consequences”. The expert may not say: “Therefore you must want this”. What society wants remains a political, democratic question.

This prevents both the technocratic illusion that there is one correct political outcome that experts can determine, and the populist illusion that expertise is irrelevant and that every opinion is equally good. Expertise is indispensable for good execution. Democracy is indispensable for legitimate direction choice.

12. Labour, Property and Economic Power

Society is organised economically in a strongly egalitarian and socialist manner. Large differences in wealth and property do not exist. Basic needs — housing, health care, education, food, energy, public transport and security of existence — are regarded as social foundations. They must not depend on extreme personal wealth or on the arbitrariness of markets that structurally fail with public goods.

Private ownership of personal goods does exist. A person may own a dwelling, tools, books, a car, savings, personal possessions. However, no small economic class may arise that possesses enormous economic power over the rest of society — that controls the means of production, the infrastructure, the essential services or the financial flows in a way that determines the living conditions of millions.

The distinction is fundamental: personal possession versus economic power over others. Personal ownership of a dwelling, tools or a car is legitimate and protected. Concentration of means of production, infrastructure or essential services in private hands that determine the living conditions of millions is not. The first is property. The second is power, and power over the conditions of existence of others does not belong in private hands.

This is not a rejection of all markets or all private initiative. It is the recognition that when economic power becomes too great, it becomes political and social power, and that form of power is just as dangerous as political power without control.

13. The Economic Order

The economy consists of a combination of public ownership of strategic infrastructure, cooperative enterprises, local businesses, limited private enterprises under strict conditions, employee participation, public investment funds, regulated markets where markets are useful, and planning where market mechanisms structurally fail.

Markets are instruments, not moral authorities. When competition works efficiently, promotes innovation and prevents concentration of power, it can be used. When monopolies, essential infrastructure, public goods or external effects are at stake, collective organisation is often better. The ideology does not demand a total centralised planned economy. It demands that economic power may not grow into political or social domination, and that the basic needs of all citizens are secured independently of their position on a labour market.

Public investment funds can steer strategic sectors without every decision having to be centrally planned. Cooperatives give employees a say and a share in the proceeds. Local businesses remain possible, provided they do not acquire structural power over essential provisions. Employee participation in larger organisations ensures that those who do the work also have influence on its direction.

The goal is not maximum equality of outcomes in every conceivable dimension. The goal is the elimination of economic power that translates into political or social domination, and the guarantee of a dignified existence for all, regardless of hierarchical position.

14. The State as Steward

State power is never regarded as the property of administrators. Officials and leaders are temporary stewards of public power. This is the Stewardship Principle.

Society owns the institutions. The administrator manages them temporarily on behalf of society. He may use the power, but never own it. He may deploy the means, but never privatise them. He may take decisions, but remains accountable. When his term ends, he surrenders the power and the means, completely and without remainder.

The office must be greater than the office-holder. No personality cults. No enormous portraits in public buildings. No buildings, streets or institutes named after living leaders. No personal state propaganda. The leader represents an institution and is replaceable. His or her personal charisma may be useful for the exercise of the function, but must never replace the institutional safeguards or place the person above the office.

This principle is the cultural and symbolic counterpart of the inverted ladder and the law of increasing control. Together they form a coherent whole: material sobriety, institutional control, and cultural refusal to glorify the person.

15. The Fall of the New Elite

Historical socialist states sometimes developed, despite official economic equality, a new administrative elite: the nomenklatura. Political power gave access to better housing, special shops, cars, exclusive health care, jobs for family members, better schools, networks and political protection. The official egalitarian ideology clashed with the practical reality of a privileged administrative class.

This is not a reason to reject egalitarian ideals. It is a reason to take the institutional design flaws seriously. The nomenklatura did not arise primarily from the bad intentions of individuals, but from bad incentives and weak control. When political power gives access to scarce goods that are not available through the ordinary economy, a parallel system of privileges arises. When control bodies are subordinate to the political leadership, that parallel privilege structure is not corrected. When family ties and networks determine access to positions, the elite becomes self-reproducing.

Civic Ascetic Meritocracy tries to prevent this development explicitly through institutional design choices: absolute separation between functional means and private wealth; full financial transparency; prohibition of special provisions that are not functional; rotation and external control; no hereditary or family privileges; strong independent judiciary and investigative powers; and the inverted ladder that limits the material attractiveness of the top.

The lesson is clear: egalitarian rhetoric without institutional safeguards against privilege formation is insufficient. Good rules make a new nomenklatura difficult. Bad or absent rules make it almost inevitable.

16. Freedom Within Equality

Economic equality is not sufficient if individual freedom disappears. A society in which everyone is materially secure but no one may speak, investigate, associate or criticise is not a liveable order. It is a prison with equal rations.

Therefore clear, legally anchored protections apply for freedom of expression, personal privacy (except for the highest office-holders, where privacy is limited to make control possible), independent journalism, association, scientific research, religious and philosophical convictions, the judiciary, and political criticism. No leader may stand above criticism. No ideology may stand above empirical research. No institution may withdraw from public accountability.

Freedom is not a luxury that may be added after economic equality. It is a structural condition for a liveable egalitarian order. Without freedom of criticism, abuses cannot come to light. Without scientific freedom, expertise cannot function. Without independent journalism, transparency becomes a farce. Without freedom of association, citizens cannot organise against abuse.

The limitation of privacy for top officials is not a breach of this principle. It is a consequence of the law of increasing control. The ordinary citizen retains maximum privacy. The powerful official surrenders privacy as the price for the power he exercises. That is consistent, not contradictory.

17. Law and Control

The judiciary functions fully independently. Political leaders may not personally remove judges because rulings displease them. There is constitutional review, independent courts, right of appeal, due process, and legal protection of citizens against the state. The law stands above the office-holder.

Without an independent judiciary all other safeguards — transparency, control, whistle-blower protection, term limits — become toothless. The judge is the last line of defence against the tendency of power to protect itself. Therefore the selection, the reward (in accordance with the inverted ladder), the independence and the protection of judges must be taken as seriously as those of other top officials, with the understanding that their independence requires extra safeguards.

Due process applies to everyone, including the powerful. There is no parallel justice for elites. There is no immunity that goes beyond functional necessity. When an office-holder is suspected of abuse, the same rule-of-law safeguards apply as for any citizen — but the procedures must be swift, transparent and effective, so that the appearance of impunity does not arise.

18. Education and Culture

The education system does not teach children: “become the boss in order to be successful.” It teaches: “become exceptionally good at something that has meaning.” Education recognises talent without creating a permanent elite. It pays attention to practical skills, science, art, technology, leadership, citizenship, history and critical thinking.

Special attention is given to preventing a new administrative caste. Professional excellence must have its own, respected career path, separate from hierarchical promotion. Pupils must see that a master carpenter, a brilliant nurse or a gifted researcher is just as “successful” as someone who holds management positions. The culture of the school, the media and the public sphere must celebrate mastery.

Citizenship education includes understanding the principles of this system: why power is dangerous, why control is necessary, why dignity does not depend on rank, and why freedom and equality need each other. It is not indoctrination in a party line. It is formation into critical citizens who understand and can defend the institutional safeguards.

19. Defence and Public Service

The military serves as a clear, almost laboratory-like example of the system. A soldier can have relatively high personally disposable income. A general disposes of enormous operational means — staffs, vehicles, communication systems, security, housing during deployment — but can become personally hardly richer from them. He receives what is necessary to perform his function excellently, but does not own those means. When he leaves office he surrenders them.

Command authority must never be equated with personal superiority. The general is an official with exceptional responsibility, not a superior human being. His or her authority is functional, not existential. The soldier who serves under him or her is not lesser; he or she is someone with a different role, often with mastery of his or her own that the general does not possess.

The same principle applies to all public service: the greater the operational means, the stricter the separation between function and person, the stricter the control, the more limited the personal material benefit. The police chief, the director of the railways, the head of the energy supply, the top of the judiciary: all operate under the same logic.

20. The New Definition of Success

Success is no longer: money + power + possessions. Success is: craftsmanship + contribution + freedom + knowledge + social meaning.

A machinist, doctor, farmer, programmer, soldier, teacher, artist, researcher or nurse must be able to lead a fully successful life without ever seeking administrative power. Society honours mastery. It does not automatically honour hierarchical position. Status follows from proven excellence and contribution, not from the size of the budget or the number of subordinates.

This redefinition is cultural and institutional. Culturally: media, education, public recognition and social norms celebrate mastery. Institutionally: reward structures, career paths and symbolic recognition (distinctions, public honour) follow the same logic. Whoever is exceptional in his or her craft is seen, rewarded and respected — even if he or she has never held a management position.

21. The Paradox of Leadership

Those who most strongly desire power are not necessarily the people to whom power can most safely be entrusted. This is the central paradox of every political system.

Whoever seeks power out of ego, out of the lust for control, out of ideological obsession, or out of the conviction that he or she alone knows the truth, is often precisely the one most inclined to abuse, to isolation from criticism, to the formation of personal networks, and to the identification of personal interest with the general interest. Whoever accepts power out of a sense of duty, out of competence, and despite the material and personal costs, is often the safer choice — but that person applies less aggressively.

A society must therefore find leaders who are competent, prepared to take responsibility, but not dependent on power for their identity. The inverted ladder, the voluntary filter, the extreme control and the cultural revaluation of mastery serve precisely this purpose: to discourage those who seek power for power’s sake, and to select and protect those who are prepared to serve despite the costs.

It is not a perfect filter. No system is. It is a serious institutional answer to an old, persistent problem. By reducing the material reward, maximising control, limiting privacy, and damping the cultural glory of power, the attractiveness for the wrong motives is structurally reduced. What remains is hopefully a larger proportion of people who want to bear the burden because the task is worth it.

22. The Transition

An existing democratic society can move peacefully and constitutionally in the direction of this model. No revolution is necessary. No violence. No political purges. No expropriation without legal procedures and fair compensation where that is appropriate.

Possible phases, which can overlap and be spread over time:

1. Anti-corruption reforms and full disclosure of interests for political and senior civil service officials. This is often the least controversial and most urgently necessary first step.

2. Reform of political salaries, expense arrangements and functional means in the direction of the inverted ladder and the distinction between functional and personal.

3. Strengthening of public basic provisions so that security of existence is no longer dependent on extreme individual wealth or market failure.

4. Expansion of employee participation and cooperative forms in relevant sectors.

5. Meritocratic reform of civil service and semi-public selection, with safeguards against self-reproduction of elites.

6. Institutional strengthening of independent control bodies, whistle-blower protection and the judiciary.

7. Further economic democratisation and limitation of concentration of economic power over essential infrastructure and services.

8. Cultural and educational reforms that place mastery above rank, and that anchor the new definition of success.

Each step is constitutionally, legally and democratically justifiable. No step requires the suspension of rights or the elimination of political opponents. The transition is evolutionary, not revolutionary — but it is directed and principled.

23. Historical and Philosophical Placement

Civic Ascetic Meritocracy takes elements over and rejects others. It is not a syncretism without core, but a coherent selection on the basis of the central principles.

From capitalism it takes the productivity of markets where they function, the room for initiative, and the recognition that incentives matter. It rejects the concentration of economic power, the linking of wealth to political influence, and the cultural glorification of wealth as a measure of success.

From social democracy it takes the basic provisions, the democratic institutions, and the attention to social security. It goes further in the separation of power and reward, and in the institutional safeguards against elite formation.

From classical Marxism it takes the critique of economic domination and the analysis of class power. It rejects the necessity of revolution as the only path, the party as the sole vanguard, the underestimation of institutional control, and the tendency to subordinate freedom to economic goals.

From Marxist-Leninist systems it learns the dangers of the nomenklatura, the party bureaucracy, and the gap between egalitarian rhetoric and privilege practice. That lesson is processed institutionally, not propagandistically denied.

From democratic socialism it takes the emphasis on democracy, cooperation and participation. From technocracy it takes the valuation of expertise, but refuses to reduce political choices to technical ones. From classical meritocracy it takes selection on ability, but builds in strong safeguards against caste formation. From republicanism it takes the aversion to personal power and the emphasis on the office above the office-holder. From cooperative economics it takes employee participation and shared ownership where that is meaningful.

Counter-arguments are taken seriously. That the inverted ladder may discourage competent people: therefore the cultural and symbolic recognition of service must be strong, and the material reward of executive excellence high enough. That extreme control can become bureaucratic: therefore rotation, external audits, and the obligation of results orientation. That meritocracy always remains subjective: therefore multiple bodies, publicity, and right of appeal. That egalitarian economies can inhibit innovation: therefore retention of markets where they work, and room for initiative within the limits of concentration of power. To each of these objections the system offers institutional answers, without claiming that they completely disappear.

24. Institutional Safeguards Against Abuse of Power

A convincing ideology must not deny its weak points, but show how it deals with them. Below the principal dangers and the corresponding institutional countermeasures are treated systematically.

Hidden corruption. Full financial transparency, regular wealth audits by rotating external controllers, disclosure of interests, prohibition of offshore constructions for office-holders, and independent investigative powers with access to all relevant data.

Favouritism and nepotism. Objective, multiple selection procedures, anonymous components where possible, public criteria, citizen representation on committees, and absolute prohibitions on appointments of direct family members in relationships of dependence.

Ideological conformity. Protection of dissenting opinions within the public service, academic freedom, and the refusal to let political loyalty prevail over demonstrable competence.

Bureaucratisation. Limited terms of office, rotation, obligation of results accountability, and periodic evaluation of procedures for efficiency and necessity.

Addiction to power and elite formation. Inverted ladder, limited privacy, cultural damping of personality cult, and the impossibility of privatising functional means.

Manipulation of selection procedures. Multiple independent bodies, external evaluation of the selection processes themselves, publicity, and right of appeal.

Information control. Independent journalism, whistle-blower protection, and legal obligations of open government, with exceptions only for legitimate security and privacy interests.

Institutional self-protection. Separation of control bodies and political leadership, impossibility for the political top to dismiss controllers without heavy procedure, and the ultimate subjection of everyone to the independent judiciary.

None of these measures is watertight. Together they form a dense network that makes systematic abuse difficult, risky and little rewarding.

25. The Society That Emerges

From these principles emerges a society in which economic security is widely shared, social dignity is not determined by rank, expertise is rewarded, leaders are carefully selected, and political power leads precisely to more responsibility, more control and less personal privilege.

The worker need not become an administrator in order to live with dignity. The administrator may never forget that he or she is only a temporary steward. Power is borrowed. Leadership is a sacrifice. Prosperity is a right, not a privilege of the powerful.

It is not a promise of perfection. It is a design for a state that enables fallible people to deal with power without making that power their personal property. A state in which the inverted ladder, the law of increasing control, the voluntary filter, the distinction between functional and personal, the independent judiciary, the cultural revaluation of mastery, and the democratic legitimacy of direction choices together form a coherent whole.

In that society success is not the climb to the top of a hierarchy. Success is excellence in a meaningful craft, contribution to the common, the freedom to think and speak, and the certainty that the basis of existence does not depend on the arbitrariness of markets or the favour of the powerful.

That is Civic Ascetic Meritocracy. That is the Manifesto of Inverted Power.

Power is borrowed.
Wealth confers no right to rule.
Leadership is not a prize. It is an obligation.
Whoever receives more power must be given less opportunity to use that power for himself.
The worker need not become an administrator in order to live with dignity.

— End of the Manifesto —